This document is a small excerpt from the 1970 Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission document titled: Statewide Historical Preservation Report P-C-1 for Cranston, Rhode Island

The State Institutions at Howard

On a hill that rolls gradually up from the Pawtuxet River across Pontiac Avenue stands the Howard Reservation, a campus-like setting that includes Victorian stone structures, numerous early twentieth-century Colonial Revival brick buildings, and assorted new facilities. Its story is part of the social history of all of Rhode Island, not just Cranston. The development of Howard was Rhode Island's first attempt to provide social services statewide through publicly supported and publicly administered institutions. As such, the Howard Reservation signals both a significant change in the role of the state and a major alternation in the treatment of the poor, the mentally ill, and the criminal.

In the early years of the country's history, poverty, crime and mental illness were considered matters manageable by and within each town. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, need was considered to be a natural part of the order of things, an inevitable element of the human condition. Social theory and theology, both assuming a hierarchical view, acknowledge the needy as integral parts of the community to be pitied and helped. In Rhode Island communities, as in other colonial towns, vagrants and others who did not belong were "warned out" and summarily driven from the town line, but those who did belong were accommodated either by public humiliation or imprisonment, in the case of culprits, or charity, in the case of the impoverished and diseased.

In practice, individual towns paid a fixed sum for the maintenance of each indigent person, with the town supplying the necessary clothing and medical care. Frequently, the needy were auctioned off to the lowest bidder.

In sum, for the first 150 years of American history, poverty, crime, and insanity were regarded as natural components of human society; the local approach to providing social services reflected the seventeenth and eighteenth century view of the town as the basic unit of social organization.

Late 19th Century view of Work House and House of Correction (1873); Howard Avenue

Adult Correctional Institution, formally Providence County Jail and State Prison (1878); Pontiac Avenue; photograph 1879; architect, Stone and Carpenter.

With the coming of the American Revolution and the nineteenth century, a new philosophy evolved. It held that deviance and poverty were not inevitable but simply the result of a poor environment. The solution was believed to be the isolation of the poor, the mentally ill, and the criminal in an environment that eliminated the tensions and chaos engendering deviant behavior.

Poor farms and asylums sprang up around the country. In Providence, the Dexter Asylum opened in 1828 to care for the sick and feeble, and, in the 1847, Butler Hospital was opened-one of the most progressive institutions for the treatment of the mentally ill in the nation. In 1839, Cranston's Town Council voted to purchase the Rebecca Jencks estate in what is today Wayland Park at the foot of the present Meschanticut Valley Parkway, and use it as a poor farm.

Although by 1850 fifteen of Rhode Island's thirty-one towns had established town asylums or poor farms, their operation did not reflect the kind of progressive thinking that was embodied at Dexter and Butler. The situation of the poor and the insane poor was not only scandalous, as revealed in Thomas Hazard's 1851 *Report on the poor and Insane in Rhode Island*, which graphically delineated the miserable living conditions of most of the state's poor, it also reflected a continuation of the local approach to social problems. Following Hazard's report, the legislature abolished the chains and dark rooms that had characterized the treatment of the insane in many towns.

Legislative attention did not return to the poor and insane until 1864, when the General Assembly appointed a committee to inquire into the expediency of erecting a state asylum. Two years later, a state Board of Charities and Corrections was established similar to that in Massachusetts, to "devise a better system of caring for the unfortunate unlawful classes of the state". The act that created the Board provided for the establishment of a state workhouse, a house of correction, a state asylum for the incurable insane, and a state almshouse. The board moved to consolidate facilities by establishing a "state farm" that would simultaneously raise standards for the indigent and - a key development - relieve the localities of their responsibilities. Two adjacent Cranston farms were acquired the old Stukeley Westcott farm belonging to Thomas Brayton and the William A. Howard farm further west.

Plans for a state farm reflect the adoption by the state of Rhode Island of some of the current thinking affecting social services. The selection of a pastoral site far from the city is indicative of the prevailing philosophy that many of the nineteenth-century's social ills derived from the chaos of the urban industrial environment. Institutionalization, to create a new, controlled and ameliorative environment replaced assignment of the destitute to local families. Almshouses would care for the "worthy" or hard-core poor, the permanently disabled, and others who clearly could not care for themselves. The able-bodied or "unworthy" poor who sought public aid would be institutionalized in workhouses where their behavior could be controlled and where, away from the temptations of society, they would develop new habits of industry to prepare themselves for more productive lives and less dependence.

The creation of a state asylum for the insane signaled a significant change in public policy toward the mentally ill. Unlike the earlier optimistic era in the 1840s when Butler Hospital opened, the newer prevailing philosophy assumed that many of the insane were incurable, and therefore there was little justification for providing expensive hospitals for them.

Thus, in planning the State Asylum, therapy was the last of the goals listed. The Asylum would offer "every facility for economical, comfortable, and perhaps even to a degree, curative care…" The commissioners chose as their model the Asylum on Blackwell's Island in New York City which had one of the worst reputations in the nation for patient care but also had the lowest annual cost per patient. They wrote that the frame buildings at Blackwell's Island were "far better in every respect for the accommodation of the insane than costly buildings of brick or stone."

Eighteen frame buildings were constructed in 1870, and that November 118 mental patients were admitted - 65 charity cases from Butler Asylum, 25 from town poor houses and 28 from asylums in Vermont and Massachusetts where the state had sent them. The patients at the State Asylum were poor and believed beyond help, as is reflected in the evolution of names for the asylum. Initially it was to be called the State Insane Asylum; in 1869 the Asylum for the Pauper Insane; and in 1870 the State Asylum for the Incurable Insane. In 1885, to relieve the cities and towns from the burden of supporting their insane poor, the General Assembly adopted a resolution that the State Asylum for the Insane should serve as a receiving hospital for all types of mental disorder, acute as well as chronic, thereby merging the two. By giving over the Asylum to "undesirable" elements, the poor, the incurable, and the foriegnborn, the upper and middle classes thus restricted their own ability to use it. Therapy was second to custody.

In 1872, work began on the oldest remaining institutional building on the Howard Reservation-the workhouse and house of correction, until recently the minimum security prison. The three-story building was the first of many built from the stone quarried on the farm by inmates and constructed by Horace Foster, the master mason who had worked on many of the Sprague families' Pawtuxet Valley mills. To avoid all unnecessary expense, plaster was applied directly to the stone. Completed in 1873, the building cost almost $100,000 and was heated by steam. The philosophy behind the design of the building was clearly stated:

We have endeavored to combined convenience with strength, durability, safety, and depend upon proportions alone for the appearance of the structure.

The construction of the workhouse and house of correction as different halves of the same building reflects in a literal sense the late nineteenth-century perception of how closely idleness and lawlessness were intertwined. As the Board of Charities declared in 1873:

> "The greater number of persons sent to the work-house and house of correction are not naturally vicious but the victims of habit, or disease, call it what you will, or intemperance. These are in many cases susceptible to reformatory influences, and by forcibly restraining them for a time from temptation, supplying them with new trains of thought, breaking up their old associates and bringing them within the sphere of religious and moral influences, an opportunity to say the least is given them to change their ways."

The statewide statistics of offenses for which people were sentenced to the workhouse apparently bears out this belief. The largest numbers in 1872 were for common drunkenness, 309; vagrancy, 50; prostitution, 13; begging, 3, and neglect to support family, 8. These statistics reveal problems that were social ills in an expanding industrial metropolis. Of the 4,364 people committed to the workhouse and house of correction in its first five years, 2,844 came from Providence; North Providence, Pawtucket, and Woonsocket totaled 676; 56 came from Cranston.

In attempting to explain the origins of these problems the State Board of Charities and Corrections repeated the prevailing philosophy that society was changing too rapidly, and that traditional values were being undermined by the large influx of foreigners. The percentage of inmates of foreign birth was a regular feature of the Board's annual reports. The Board's explanation for the rise in mental illness agree with the views of Dr. Edward Mann, Medical Supervisor of New York City's Ward's Island, who was quoted in the annual report for 1877:

> "Next to hereditary pre-disposition, which is the first and predisposing cause of insanity, comes the great mental activity and strain upon the nervous system that appertains to the present age and state of civilization. This feverish haste and unrest, which characterize us as people, and the want of proper recreation and sleep, tend to a rapid decay of the nervous system and to insanity as a necessary consequence."

Beginning in the late 1870's and the 1880's the original wooden structures at the state farm were gradually replaced by stone ones, many of which remain today. The Adult Correctional Institute was completed in 1878 as the State Prison and Providence County Jail. A massive stone structure designed by the noted Providence architectural firm of Stone and Carpenter, the prison incorporated the most up to date penological philosophy and technology. The building contained two wings of three-tiered cellblocks flanking an octagonal central administration building. The 250 cells were arranged fronting either east or west for unobstructed sunlight and had corridors on two sides so that both sides or each cell were accessible to guards. Each floor of the prison was formed of a plate of cast iron ribbed cross wire on top and covered with a coast of cement. It was opened under the supervision of Warden General Nelson Viall who oversaw the prisoners as they walked in chains from the old prison, which stood near the site of the present State House in Providence. Commander of a Black regiment in the Civil War, General Viall personally land scaped the prison grounds as memorials to his troops.

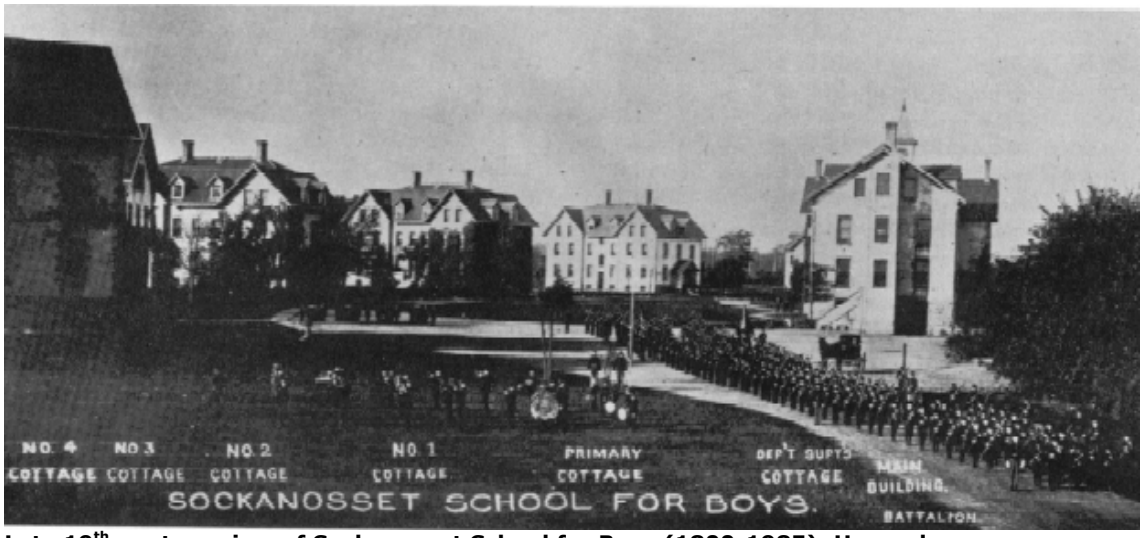
By 1894 the Prison and Jail housed almost 150 more inmates than it was intended to; $300,000 was appropriated for construction of a new jail, but while bids were being solicited the appropriation was rescinded. Finally in 1924, when the facility held twice its capacity, a new wing designed by George F. Hall was added to the north. Built in the same style of random ashlar construction, it blends well with the original structure and the warden's house immediately in front of the prison entrance. Today, standing high and isolated, the Adult Correctional Institution, with its massive central cupola

and small towers along the walls of the prison yard, remains an imposing statement of the Victorian conception of prisons as fortresses.

In contrast to this fortress built to house hardened criminals, the cottage system was employed to give way ward young people a sense of homelife. In 1880, eighteen acres were purchased from Job Wilbur to build the Oak Lawn Girls School on the New London Turnpike at what is now Brayton Avenue. This spot was picked because of its distance from the other institutions; alone among the inmates at Howard's several facilities the girls and their visitors used the Oak Lawn Railroad station.

The Sockanosset Boys School was also located at a distance from the other institutions and also used a different train station, the small one called "Sockanosset" near the foot of Sockanosset Road. The extant but largely unused cottages at Sockanosset, at once institutional and domestic, were built between 1881-1895 and combine solid rubblestone walls, brownstone quoins, and arched windows with Stick Style porches in handsome fashion. They are sited around a circular driveway in the center of which used to stand a large administration building that housed a chapel and industrial shops. A new chapel and infirmary structure was built in 1891 from design by Stone, Carpenter and Wilson. Built of stone with a shingled porch, it is one of the most handsome buildings at Howard. A new hospital and gym were built in 1898 and an additional industrial building in 1912-1914.

Although in disrepair, the buildings at Sockanosset, beautifully sited on spacious grounds behind a stone wall, are among the finest nineteenth-century institutional buildings in the state.



Late 19th-century view of Sockanosset School for Boys (1800-1985); Howard.

In 1888, the General Assembly appropriated funds for a new almshouse to replace the frame building that had been originally built for the insane. Known now as the Center Building, the Almshouse was also designed by Stone, Carpenter and Wilson. Its name acknowledgers the prevailing trend in institutional design, as evidenced in the House of Correction and State Prison, as well: the installation of a large central administration building with office and residential facilities for the staff and public eating and worship spaces for the inmates who were segregated in wings flanking the central structure. In this case, the wings housed 150 men and 150 women and includes an additional wing, the children's "cottage" for sixty children. Opened in 1890, the three-and a half story stone building stands as a series of long buildings running north-south and interrupted regularly by octagonal stair towers. Its handsome stone work and red-brick trim and its site behind copper beach trees on a

bluff overlooking Pontiac Avenue make the Center Building one of the most visually striking structures in Rhode Island.

Taken in sum, the Minimum Security Prison, the Adult Correctional Institution, the Sockanosset School, and the Center Building, together with the two houses built for the Supervisor and Assistant Supervisor of the State Farm (Eastman and Keene Houses, built in 1870 and 1850, respectively) represent the Howard Reservation as it looked in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Although the environment is more developed today, the presence of large, stone, institutional buildings on the hill rising up from the Pawtuxet River, lining Pontiac and Reservoir Avenues, and surrounded by acres of farmland indicates both the configuration and general impact of the state institutions at Howard on the Cranston landscape.

The major improvement of the decade before the turn of the century was the appointment of Howard's first full-time medical superintendent, Dr. George F. Keene, which signaled the introduction of professionally trained, therapy-oriented administrators at the State Farm. The new orientation manifested itself in the building plan for the Hospital for the Insane created in 1900 from designs by the prominent Providence architectural firm of Martin and Hall. Based on the contemporary practice of constructing hospitals for the insane on the cottage or ward plan, "thereby establishing small communities in separate buildings that are more easily taken care of and administered," the plan was the first at Howard to establish a campus-like quadrangle arrangement of buildings in place of one large self-contained structure. A key part of the new plan was a communal dining room, modeled after the one in the hospital at Danvers, Massachusetts. As a result of Martin and Hall's recommendations, the Service Building was constructed in 1903 and included a dining room measuring 195 feet by 104 feet, which could seat 1,400 people.

The master plan outlined by Martin and Hall was slow in being realized. In 1912, the Reception Hospital (A Building) was opened. With 184 beds it was intended to permit appropriate diagnosis and classification of patients as they entered the institution. This effort became a reality with the assignment in 1916 of psychiatric social workers to the state hospital. The Training School for Nurses was opened in conjunction with the Reception Building, and when the Rhode Island Medical Society held its annual meeting there, it recorded its approval. Nonetheless, the new facility did not relieve overcrowding, and in 1913, 2000 people were sleeping on the floor at the State Hospital for the Insane. The completion of B Ward in 1916 and C Ward in 1918 responded to the population increase and at last fulfilled Martin and Hall's plan for "simple and dignified" buildings and "plain red brick walls with pitched roofs, without any attempt at ornamentation." Standing just west of Howard Avenue and opposite the old House of Correction, the Martin and Hall quadrangle signals the beginning of a new mode of construction at Howard - red brick buildings in a simple Colonial Revival style grouped around a quadrangle and containing dormitories, single rooms, and porches as well as treatment facilities.

The concern for professionalism at the staff level soon affected the administration as well. In 1918, the General Assembly unified the Board of State Charities with the Board of Control and Supply, which controlled state expenditure and formed the Penal and Charitable Commission. Until this time there had been considerable tension between the two Boards, the Board of Supply frequently imposing fiscal restraints on the Board of State Charities' efforts at reform. Although some proposed plans to relieve overcrowding were postponed due to shortages caused by the First World War, the new Commission constructed a new building for the criminally insane and additional dormitories.

The old twelve foot high solid fence which shut off patients from the outside world was replaced in 1919 by a lower lattice one with a view of the surrounding countryside. This change alone symbolized the change in attitude which was articulated in the 1920 Annual Report:

> "The commission tries to save dollars, but it would rather save a man or a woman. It wants to see the plants in Cranston, Providence, and Exeter a credit to Rhode Island, standing like so many Temples of Reform, Education, and Philanthropy. But it is even more desirable that its work should be represented in reconstructed Living Temples in the morals, minds and bodies of those who have been ministered to by these public administrators. For it is better to minister than administer."

These efforts at reform in the treatment of the insane were paralleled by a new attitude towards the infirm. The Almshouse became the State Infirmary and attention was focused on the medical, not the social, disabilities of the inmates.

Other changes at the institutions reflected changes in society and the institutions themselves. With postwar prosperity and prohibition, the number of residents at the House of Corrections fell dramatically, so that there were only thirty-one inmates living there in 1921. In 1923, the House of Corrections was abolished by the General Assembly and the building soon converted into a Women's Reformatory. A new Public Welfare Commission was established, and under its supervision a new dormitory and men's hospital were constructed, several older buildings renovated, and sprinklers installed to maximize safety. An innovation initiated by the Commission was a rehabilitation work program begun in 1928. This program permitted patients to live with families and work in the community. Nonetheless, most of the patients at the state institutions worked the 225 acres of state farmland, harvesting far in excess of the needs of the reservation. As late as 1941, 750,000 quarts of milk 400,000 eggs and 14,000 tons of beef were being produced on the farm.

Although they resulted in fewer new structures, parallel reforms were taking place in the philosophy and management of the criminal population at Howard. In the 1910s, social workers were regularly involved in the treatment of delinquent youths, and the Annual Reports are filled with examples of how the younger sisters of girls at Oakland were disuaded from their sisters' footsteps by the intercession uplifting social workers. For adults, new attitudes in penology called for "intermediate sentences" to permit authorities to reward improved behavior with early parole. The law enabling parole was passed in 1915, and, by 1918, 1,800 prisoners were on parole

In the 1920s the "New Penology," as it was known, believed that people were sent to prison for treatment not retribution. Classification of prisoners was made more precise in order to assess their capabilities so they could be properly trained in preparation for release. The state developed an industrial training program that was netting the state $90,000 a year by selling prison manufactured textile goods in 1930, when a federal law prohibited interstate traffic of prison made goods. "Reformatories" were erected across the country to house first offenders and segregate them from hardened criminals. Rhode Island's (now Medium Security) was completed in 1933. The Reformatory never lived up to its promise. Because of overcrowding in the Providence County Jail, ninety-eight inmates from that institution were transferred to the new facility, thereby undermining the planned separation of new and recidivist offenders.

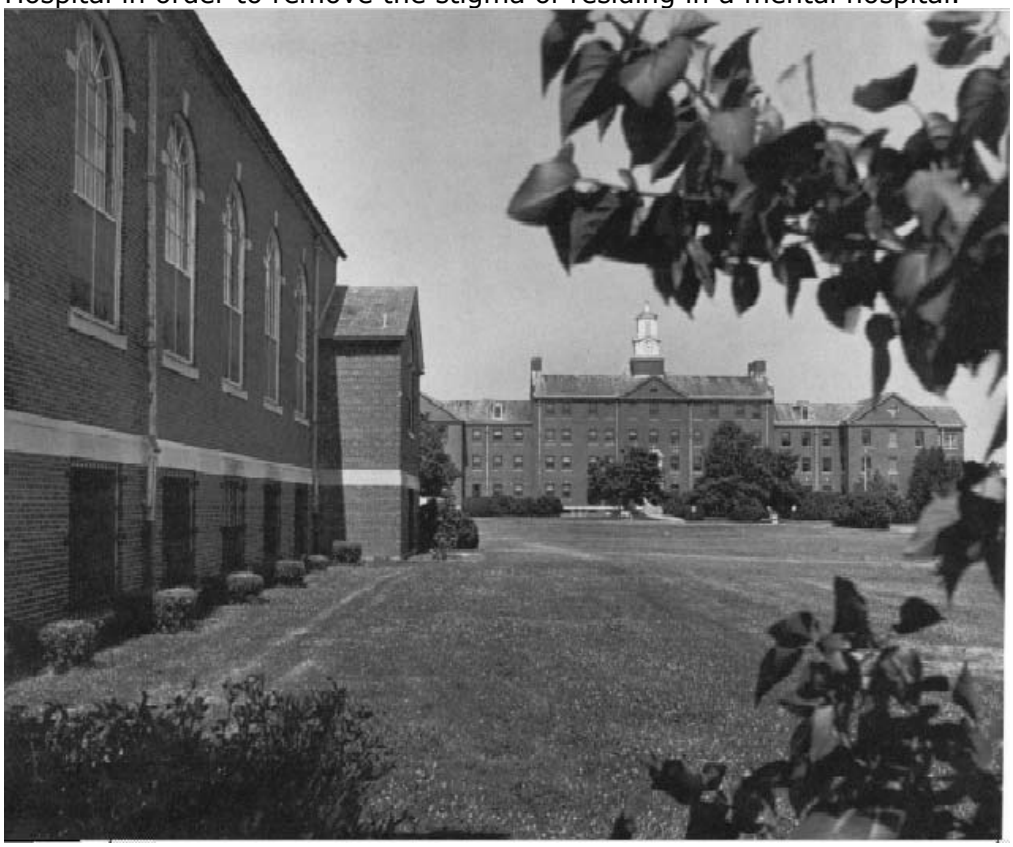
It was the infusion of large amounts of federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds that dramatically altered the appearance of the Howard complex and permitted, if briefly, appropriate physical accommodation for patients, inmates, and attendants. Overcrowding has been a chronic problem at Howard and only the large-scale construction program of the WPA could solve it. Despite the building effort of the 1920s, in 1933 the State Hospital, with accommodations for 1,550, housed 2,235 and was labeled the most overcrowded mental hospital in the northeast.

Governor Theodore Francis Green, a long-time advocate of improving conditions at Howard, called a special referendum on August 6 of 1935 to secure voter approval of a list of projects to be constructed with federal aid. In September, however, the Public Works Administration in Washington warned that Rhode Island and several other states were in danger of losing their public-works due to local delays. Green went immediately to Washington and received the concession that Rhode Island's projects would be accepted if the plans for the buildings were submitted not later than October 20 and contracts for construction signed on December 15. This astounding deadline was met by asking architects from all over the state to prepare the drawings with the understanding that if the project were rejected, payment would be sacrificed. In fact, sixteen different architectural and engineering firms completed the drawings and specifications in just twenty-five days. In the years 1935-1938 twenty-five buildings were erected for the State Hospital for Mental Disease, three for the State Infirmary, and three for the Sockanosset School. The appearance of Howard was dramatically altered by this construction which went up so fast the Providence Journal declared a "new skyline rises at Howard."

Built in a uniform, red-brick, Georgian Revival style, the structures comprising the State Hospital and State Infirmary are grouped in campus fashion on either side of Howard Avenue. Among the most interesting are the Benjamin Rush Building, with an ogee gable inspired by the Joseph Brown House in Providence, and the cluster of Physician's Cottages which finally permitted the hospital staff improved residential accommodations. Taken in total, the buildings constructed at Howard by the WPA incorporated a uniformity of style, scale, material, and siting that is striking. Historically they represent the coming together of national policy and local initiative. Architecturally, they present one of the most lucid statements of the Georgian Revival in Rhode Island.

But despite the tremendous improvement made possible by the WPA, by 1947 conditions at Howard had once again deteriorated due to overcrowding. The infirmary, with a capacity of 815, housed 1,059 people. The Hospital for the Insane, built for 2,700 beds, held over 3,000 patients. Increased salaries were approved to help recruit additional staff, and it was proposed that a master plan be developed. In 1947, the "Hospital Survey and Construction Act of Rhode Island," stemming from the federal Hospital Survey and Construction Act of that year, was passed. Through it, the governor was authorized to appoint an advisory hospital council to advise and consult with the Department of Health in implementing the Survey and Construction Act. However, no immediate action was taken, and in 1949 the population at Howard reached its highest in history without significant new construction. Interestingly, in 1959 an expert from Boston declared that the conditions at Howard were shameful and yet "relatively good" compared with mental hospitals in the country. The problem stemmed not from a lack in the annual budget (Rhode Island ranked twelfth nationwide in the amount spent per patient) but in the inability to raise capital funds to match federal programs.

Finally in 1954, an active public-relations effort, including pamphlets detailing the overcrowding, articles in the Journal, and radio spots, results in passage of a bond issue. As a result, the J. Varley Female Geriatric Clinic was completed in 1956 and the Manuel F. Mathias Male Geriatrics Hospitals in 1960. That same year Rhode Island's first state-operated General Hospital was created by uniting the responsibilities of the State Infirmary and Almshouse. In 1962, the General Hospital and State Hospital for Mental Diseases merged to become the Rhode Island Medical Center. The former became the Center General Hospital and the latter the Institute of Mental Health. In so doing, Rhode Island was the first state to create therapy units for its mentally ill, an approach pioneered at the Center General Hospital. As a result, four buildings housing elderly patients were transferred to the jurisdiction of the Cranston General Hospital in order to remove the stigma of residing in a mental hospital.



Institute of Mental Health (1960); Howard Avenue

In 1967, the Medical Center was divided. The Center General Hospital was designated to serve as an infirmary for the prison and the Institute of Mental Health. Both hospitals are administered by a new Department of Mental Health, Retardation, and Hospitals, In 1977, the IMH was divided into nine units to deal with specific categories and regions of patients. The institution is currently undergoing another philosophical re-orientation, encouraging group homes away from the environment of Howard. The extent of this change will very likely depend on federal support, but if carried out extensively, it will help to redefine the role of Howard just as previous changes in attitude have.